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SUBJECT: A PRIMER ON THE WRECKING POWER OF THE RUHNAMA

REF: ASHGABAT 0030

SUMMARY

11. (U) Modern Turkmenistan has come to be defined by President Saparmurat Niyazov's first major book, the Ruhnama or "Book of the Soul," published in 2001. The first of two volumes, Ruhnama Volume I combines philosophical ruminations and moral dictates within a pseudo-historical narrative. While the ideas expressed in the Ruhnama are relatively harmless, the book's popularization has made it a primary tool of the megalomania and upside-down logic of Niyazov's government. References to the book have accompanied nearly every public action or policy introduced in the past five years. Niyazov's far-ranging "reforms" and the climate of fear he has created reach through every sector of life in Turkmenistan and have resulted in a dramatic degradation in the social services and civil rights afforded to Turkmenistan's citizens. The Ruhnama's own anodyne rhetoric and the Disneyland-esque "culture" Niyazov has created out of it perfectly illustrate how Turkmenistan's citizens have been forced to live like little children: deprived of the means or knowledge to decide their fate, they are entirely dependent on the fickle will of a sick father. End Summary.

EAT, SLEEP, BREATHE -- AND RECITE THE RUHNAMA

12. (U) It has now been five years since the introduction of Niyazov's Ruhnama Volume I, a rambling combination of regional history, reflections on the meaning of Turkmen ethnicity and nationhood, language, and philosophy. It was originally written in Turkmen -- leading many to speculate that it was ghost-written. Niyazov's other works include: Ruhnama, Volume 2 - 2004; Turkmen Ilim Aman Bolsun (Let My Turkmen People Be Blessed)-2003; Turkmenin Bash Eyyamynyn Ruhy (The Spirit of the Five Epochs of the Turkmen People) - 2003; Mahribanlarym (My Beloved People) - 2005; Menin Ruhubelentlik Baharym (The Spring of My Spiritual Inspiration) - 2005; Dogan Doganyn Galasy (Brother is Brother's Castle) - 2005; and Turkmenistan Bagtym Menin (Turkmenistan, My Happiness) - 2006.

13. (U) The introduction of each book has come with media fanfare and the erection of billboards and in-situ shrine-like exhibits of the books along roads and in public squares in Ashgabat and the regions, in schools, museums, administrative buildings, even private homes. As the Ruhnama now forms the core of all education in Turkmenistan, teachers are expected to creatively integrate Niyazov's works into their courses -- if they do not receive a similar order first from a prescient supervisor or regional educational administrator.

14. (U) While most would agree that the Ruhnama is in itself a

harmless, if badly-written, work, its aggressive popularization throughout all sectors in Turkmenistan -- and particularly its use in Turkmenistan's schools -- has made it the regime's primary brainwashing tool. From kindergarten, children take classes in the Ruhnama, memorizing vast portions of it, watching daily readings from it on television, and hearing it broadcast across state radio. All public speeches are infused with quotations from the book and praise for the Great Leader, most public buildings bear a poster or painting or saying praising the Ruhnama. Billboards around the city depict smiling students seated around a glowing Ruhnama, and major intersections in the capital are adorned with large advertisements of the president's books, usually arranged around an image of Ruhnama Volume 1. Schools receive prizes for their Ruhnama exhibits, encouraging them to paint Ruhnama-themed scenes in every classroom and hallway so that students never lose sight of the text that underlies their education. As a result of this constant audio-visual exposure to the Ruhnama idea, most children can readily rattle off portions of the Ruhnama, and in their artwork mimic the style and themes in the book. Arguably, children may go through the motions of an ideology without absorbing its meaning; the real power of the Ruhnama and its cultural baggage is in the way it is used to disguise truly painful policy changes and official behavior.

STATE EDUCATION A COVER FOR RUHNAMA INDOCTRINATION

15. (U) A student's passage from lower to middle to secondary school and then into a higher education institution hinges on examinations testing the student's memorization of and understanding of the Ruhnama. Pure Ruhnama classes are a basic part of the state curriculum for all grades, and even in such ostensibly private or semi-private institutions as the Turkmen-Turkish high schools and university, the Bashkent Centers (also Turkish-supported) and the Russian-language specialized schools in Ashgabat. Likewise, medical, technical and other studies - even driving schools -- all

ASHGABAT 00001095 002 OF 005

include a substantial investment of time in Ruhnama studies and judge successful completion by the results of a final Ruhnama exam.

16. (U) In concert with this expansion of Ruhnama studies has come a contraction in the number of hours devoted to other studies, a reduction in the number of years of secondary school to nine total, reduction of undergraduate classroom studies from four to one or two and elimination of all masters-level and higher degrees. Class hours and non-state approved diplomas acquired outside Turkmenistan are invalid. Meanwhile, all subjects -- even the hard sciences and math -- are now required to incorporate lessons from the Ruhnama. For undergraduate studies, the one to two years of classroom studies is followed by a mandatory two to three year practical internship, which essentially provides free minimally-skilled labor to state institutions. In mid-2006 Niyazov declared that the practicum at the Agricultural Institute would involve working in the fields with "students teaching each other."

17. (U) In December 2005 the president announced his intention to have a Ruhnama University built in Ashgabat, to accommodate 3,000 students. The university, to be completed in 2010, will collate international "research" on the book and promote study of the Ruhnama internationally. In a typical broadcast, Watan TV news (state television, in multiple languages) carried a report on October 2 that "The Ruhnama has spread widely among higher educational institutions of Europe. There are many students who regularly read the Ruhnama in libraries or always carry the book with them. The number of people who read the Ruhnama over the Internet is unlimited.... It has become a fact that the sacred Ruhnama is a guide to all people of the world." There is a government-run internet site for the book at <http://www.rukhnama.com>, and a U.S.-based Ruhnama souvenir shot at <http://www.ruhnama.com>. The government-run site contains a sample Ruhnama quiz including questions such as: If a horse which can gallop when it is fat can also gallop when it is thin, it is a good horse. A) true B) false

RUHNAMA PART OF CLASSIC REPERTOIRE OF TURKMEN LITERATURE

¶8. With the switch from the Cyrillic to the Roman alphabet in 1993, President Niyazov has erected another barrier between young people here and pre-Niyazov written materials. Library budgets have been cut deeply, as have those of most social services, leaving many to sell off or give away their collections. The National Library of Turkmenistan, in Ashgabat, has simply barred off a large section of its collection. As a result, schools and homes face a lack of materials to learn about Turkmenistan's history and culture as well as about the world outside Turkmenistan. Niyazov means to fill this growing void with the Ruhnama.

¶9. (U) Some major Turkmen writers, such as the national poet Magtymguly and nationalistic tales such as the adventures of Gorogly have achieved elevated status under Niyazov's regime while others have been pushed aside or vilified. In one high-profile case that began in the mid-1990s, Niyazov publicly denounced Rahim Esenov, author of "The Crowned Wanderer," and had the author imprisoned on charges of promoting "social, ethnic, and religious hatred" because the book depicted Turkmen national hero Bayram Khan as a Shiite. The Ruhnama portrays Khan as a Sunni. Many contemporary authors have given up attempts to publish because of such barriers to free speech; all recently published works include a breathless prologue praising the Ruhnama and Niyazov. State print media bears several airbrushed photos of the president in each issue and an image of the Ruhnama above the masthead, as well as daily feature articles on the Ruhnama or a Ruhnama-centered event or scientific conference.

CLOSING INFORMATION PATHWAYS ONE BY ONE

¶10. Because DHL and other non-state express mail services have been banned, even well-intentioned grantees have no choice in the books they buy to educate children; they must purchase at the local bookstore, which sells Ruhnama-infused "textbooks" -- many of which have been developed without the aid of those trained in the subject field. Thus Niyazov has also carefully closed gaps that might otherwise permit a non-state voice to take hold here. Internet access is also dwindling: since 2005 no new Internet accounts have been granted to individuals in Turkmenistan --USG grantees wishing to open a resource center to educate the public rely on closely-guarded personal accounts they have kept since before 2005. Once an account is closed, it cannot be replaced (Note: Turkmen Telecom, the only provider of Internet accounts, simply says that opening an account "is no longer possible" but does not explain why. End Note.)

ASHGABAT 00001095 003 OF 005

TURKMEN IS THE ROOT OF ALL WORLD LANGUAGES, AND THE RUHNAMA ITS DICTIONARY

¶11. (U) The Ruhnama also is assuming a role as a dclass Turkmen "Academie Francaise," closely controlling the development of the Turkmen language. With Turkmen very much in its nascent literary stages, instead of expanding the language to meet the needs of a modern state, the president is stunting its growth to revolve around glorification of his cult-of-personality. The Ruhnama has both introduced new words and reintroduced old-fashioned words into the Turkmen lexicon. According to educated locals, most university level academic discussions require Russian due to the lack of words in the Turkmen lexicon to describe complex academic themes. Moreover, highly educated locals received their education -- primarily in Russian -- under the Soviet system. But government pressure on its employees and citizens to learn and use Turkmen, especially in official contexts, is growing. In official meetings with Emboffs, interlocutors -- particularly those at the Ministry of Education -- will often switch from more comfortable Russian into Turkmen in the presence of a high-level supervisor. In this sense host government representatives can take cover behind the official language.

¶12. Meanwhile, the development of, or reinvention of the Turkmen language, is a daily process. Locals report that new Turkmen words appear in news broadcasts, for example, and it seems these words are

either inventions of the regime or are taken from older Turkmen literary sources. The president's new names for the months of the year -- such as "Ruhnama" for September -- are now employed in the state's English textbooks, so that Turkmen children will learn these names as if they are used internationally. The same is true for the president's new names for the days of the week.

¶13. (U) In concert with this emphasis on the Turkmen language has come discrimination -- mostly indirect but still effective -- against Russian language, and by extension, Russian language speakers. Teachers without Turkmen language skills have lost their jobs throughout the country in wave upon wave of purges.

BURDEN ON TEACHERS GETS PASSED TO STUDENTS

¶14. (U) In some cases it is clear that these purges are guided primarily by budgetary concerns: the cuts precede increases in the number of classroom teaching hours and class sizes required of each teacher. But these changes are introduced or justified within the context of the Ruhnama. In August 2006 the Ministry of Education announced the end of teacher tenuring and announced that teachers would be required to undergo an annual evaluation to keep their jobs. These evaluations include a requirement that teachers publish academic "research" works - in official rhetoric this means articles that analyze or draw heavily from the Ruhnama. Teachers and many other government employees spend at least an hour of their Saturday workday in formal group study of the Ruhnama.

¶15. (U) The highly-regarded Azadi World Languages Institute has in this sense suffered particular abuse as a tool of Ruhnama policy; the Institute's teachers are now required to spend hours outside of their classroom teaching duties translating the president's books and related works into other languages. The students, meanwhile, are often pulled out of class for dancing, singing or other preparations for events to honor Niyazov's cult of personality. (Comment: Post's second English Language Fellow served at the Azadi Institute in 2005-06 and reported high levels of fatigue and stress among her fellow teachers and her students -- many of whom were eager in theory to improve their education but simply did not have any free time or energy left to do so. End Comment.).

CULTURAL SPHERE AWASH IN PINK AND GREEN

¶16. (U) These Ruhnama-centric obligations extend to the arts institutions of Turkmenistan. The art favored by the Niyazov regime tends toward a bright, static and fantastic style and lays heavy emphasis on the historical events, places and people described in the Ruhnama. The colors on the cover of the Ruhnama -- bubblegum pink and kelly green -- are presented in loud, glittering glory through routines of traditional dance and song, public readings of the Ruhnama, and performances of new songs created from quotations from the Ruhnama. Likewise all girls' school uniforms are now green. Most of these presentations are in Turkmen, with some in Russian. Within art schools the same applies; but in late 2005 the president announced the closure of art and music programs across the country, saying that they were a redundancy -- in effect, another budget cut in the education sphere.

ASHGABAT 00001095 004 OF 005

¶17. (U) The host government is currently engaged in a construction campaign of massive, luxurious marble-covered structures whose effect is to glorify the regime. Recently completed structures in Ashgabat include two new drama and music theaters, a huge children's drama theater, a puppet theater, and a new art museum and adjoining art institute. Construction has begun on similar new drama theaters in Turkmenabat and Mary, with plans for one in each regional capital. Meanwhile the government bulldozed the Pushkin Theater, the country's only Russian-language cultural institution, forcing it to move to a less conspicuous location within Ashgabat -- a former trade union hall. While the destruction of the theater was explained as a city beautification move, it also permits the regime to make a statement about the worth of Russian or non-Turkmen culture.

¶18. (U) The Holy Ruhnama rivals the Koran in Turkmenistan's grandest national mosque, at Gypjak near Ashgabat, and now takes pride of place in the mandatory Ruhnama rooms in every mosque throughout the country. The smallest village mosque will have a copy of the book if not a room or corner dedicated to it. Usually accompanied by a large picture of the president, these rooms and corners defile a traditional mosque, as Islam generally frowns upon realistic depictions of animate objects in religious architecture. Bookshelves within both the Gypjak and Gokdepe Mosques contain copies of both the Ruhnama and Koran, on separate shelves. The entrance to and dome of the Gypjak mosque is inscribed with quotations in Turkmen from the Ruhnama -- a further violation of Islamic tradition. (Comment: During Friday prayers during Ramadan 2005, Emboff observed that only a few cleaning ladies were sitting contemplatively in the Gypjak Mosque, whereas the Gokdepe Mosque twenty minutes away was about two-thirds full of worshipers. End Comment.)

THE SPIRITUAL GUIDE TO STAYING IN BUSINESS

¶19. (SBU) The Ruhnama has not only intruded upon social services, media and religion but has given impetus to an anti-business environment that crushes the least sign of personal initiative. As with every other area of life in Turkmenistan, the Ruhnama is used as a gate by the country's power structures to control who and what receives a license to operate, and then controls every detail of that operation. However, the gate system only works in one direction: business and diplomatic entities in Turkmenistan may believe that by paying public obeisance to the Ruhnama they achieve some cover for their work. It is common practice for aspiring investors to pay tribute to the Ruhnama by presenting Niyazov a translation into the language of the company's home country, or by sending a letter of praise for publication in state media. In early September, Malaysian gas company Petronas presented Niyazov with a copy of the Ruhnama in Malay. The Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates meanwhile promised an Arabic translation of Ruhnama Volume 12. (Comment: Thus Turkmenistan has acquired dozens of translations of the book and then uses these translations -- regardless of their quality -- to teach foreign languages to students at the Azadi World Languages Institute. End Comment.) Foreign companies, witnessing the arbitrary fashion in which Niyazov awards multi-million dollar construction contracts, for example, believe that such moves may pay off in a lucrative business deal.

¶20. (SBU) While companies continue to pursue this behavior, the dismal experience of such entities as the Turkish embassy demonstrate that this tactic is of limited utility. Turkish-sponsored cultural events often feature a song or other tribute to the Ruhnama and President Niyazov. Turkish Ambassador Haki Akil (close-hold) has said to the Charge that the Turkish embassy must congratulate the president on Ruhnama-focused events such as Ruhnama Day in order to protect Turkish business interests in Turkmenistan. Despite frequent such displays of loyalty to the cult of personality, Turkish interests in Turkmenistan -- particularly in the education sphere -- continue to contract [REFTEL] and host government bills to Turkish companies continued to go unpaid or are paid late.

COMMENT: MORE BAD BOOKS, MORE BRAINWASHING

¶21. (SBU) Niyazov is clearly using the Ruhnama to dumb down the population of Turkmenistan and to make them helpless. Down the road, should these policies run to their conclusion, the young people of Turkmenistan will have grown up without basic medical training; without accurate or even basic knowledge of world history,

ASHGABAT 00001095 005 OF 005

geography, world politics or their own heritage; without opportunities to develop good business practices; without even the confidence to suggest their own opinion. Fear is rampant in

contemporary Turkmenistan and opportunities for self-improvement are few. In this context, the positive impact of post's work to provide basic training, Internet access, books and movies and newspapers a roof under which they can express their opinions, and simply a reality check and source of hope, cannot be overestimated.

122. (U) Dushanbe minimize considered.

BRUSH